

# First record of Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii* for St. Helena, South Atlantic

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**Première mention du Blongios de Sturm *Ixobrychus sturmii* pour l'île de Sainte-Hélène, Atlantique Sud.** Le premier Blongios de Sturm *Ixobrychus sturmii* pour Sainte-Hélène a été photographié en octobre 2011, et à nouveau en janvier 2012, quand il a été ramassé pratiquement moribond. Sainte-Hélène se trouve à environ 1.900 km à l'ouest de la côte africaine en Namibie, où l'espèce niche. D'autres observations sur des îles océaniques d'occasionnels de cette espèce ont notamment été faites aux îles Canaries.

**O**n 9 October 2011, the Scipio-Constantine family of Jamestown, St. Helena, noted an unusual bird in their garden, which they photographed (Figs. 1–2) and were able to approach quite closely, whereupon it behaved 'quite aggressively'. The family contacted the Marine Section of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Department of the St. Helena government, who in turn contacted the St. Helena National Trust. We visited the garden early on 10 October, but the bird was not seen. However, on the basis of the photographs, the bird was

obviously a subadult Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii*.

Confirmation was sought from A. J. Prater of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, in the UK, and Beau Rowlands who maintains the St. Helena bird list. Both agreed with the identification and age of the bird (see also below). They also stated that this was the first report from St. Helena of the species.

The location where the bird was originally seen is at the upper end of Jamestown, the island's capital, at a property known as Estcourt Gardens



**Figure 1.** Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii* in threat display, Jamestown, St. Helena, 9 October 2011 (Jodie Scipio-Constantine)

Blongios de Sturm *Ixobrychus sturmii* en pose menaçante, Jamestown, Sainte-Hélène, 9 octobre 2011 (Jodie Scipio-Constantine)



**Figure 2.** Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii*, Jamestown, St. Helena, 9 October 2011; note that the left wing appears damaged (Jodie Scipio-Constantine)

Blongios de Sturm *Ixobrychus sturmii*, Jamestown, Sainte-Hélène, 9 octobre 2011; noter que l'aile gauche semble endommagée (Jodie Scipio-Constantine)



(15°56'23.52"W 05°42'41.01"S). The stream that flows through Jamestown, known locally as 'The Run', also passes through the property's garden and on to New Bridge. The stream is fringed by dense vegetation consisting mainly of species exotic to the island (Umbrella Plant *Cyperus alternifolius*, Guava *Psidium guajava*, Wild Tomato *Lycopersicon esculentum*, Pumpkin *Cucurbita maxima*, a palm *Livistona* sp., Seedwork *Acacia Leucaena leucocephala*, Thorn *Erythrina caffra*, Indian Lilac *Melia azedarach*, Yam *Colocasia esculenta* and Ginger *Alpinia speciosa*). It is flanked in places by a low dry-stone wall. The bird was seen on a small lawn beside the stream, but then entered the dense streamside vegetation.

The bird was seen again on the morning of 10 October but was not observed subsequently at this location. However, on 6 January 2012, a Dwarf Bittern was picked up by Mr P. Hern at New Bridge, 575 m downstream of the original location. It was taken to the government's Senior Veterinary Officer, J. Hollins, who found that the bird was extremely emaciated, and that the left wing had been broken but had healed in a twisted position. It was clear the bird would never fly again, so it was then put down.

The original observers thought that one wing appeared damaged, and in one of the photographs (Fig. 2) the left wing does appear to be held in an unnatural position. The identification as a subadult was confirmed by the fact that the maxilla was still largely yellow, compared with the usually all-dark bill of adults (Kushlan & Hancock 2005).

The species is a breeding migrant to central Namibia, reaching the coast at the Angolan border (Maclean 1993). This point is the nearest on the African coast to St. Helena, c.1,900 km distant. Migrants arrive in southern Africa from equatorial regions of the continent between October and December, remaining until March or April, when they again move north; the species is nomadic to some degree, and breeding appears to be highly correlated with rainfall (Kushlan & Hancock 2005).

Other vagrants noted on St. Helena postulated to have reached the island on south-east trade winds from a similar location on the African

coast include Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Allen's Gallinule *Porphyrio alleni* and Blacksmith Lapwing *Vanellus armatus* (McCulloch 2004). An adult male Dwarf Bittern was recorded on Tenerife, the Canary Islands, between August 2002 and April 2003 (Velmala *et al.* 2002), and Clarke (2006) mentions additional records from the same archipelago, on Tenerife in 1889 or 1890 and the 1970s, Lanzarote in January and October 1978, Alegranza in September 1994 (two) and Gran Canaria in January 2000.

## Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to Ms. Jodi Scipio-Constantine and her mother Monica for bringing the bird to our attention, and to Paul Hern who found it the second time. Thanks also to Tony Prater of the RSPB and Beau Rowlands for confirming the identification. Beau Rowlands also reviewed an earlier version of the manuscript. Joe Hollins examined the bird in January 2012. Neil McCulloch reviewed the final draft of this note.

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Received 19 January 2012; revision accepted 2 April 2012.